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ABSTRACT

In conventional drama, circularity is a positive thing, a return to the beginning, a symbol of the cyclical, generative nature of life. Part of John Guare's intent in his post-Absurdist play, "The House of Blue Leaves," is to help establish a new theatrical aesthetic by violating theatrical convention. For Guare, circularity is not a symbol of regeneration but of stasis. His major characters are all trapped in orbits around an absent or feeble star (an appropriate metaphor because the two people these main characters flutter around are public figures, or "stars"). In Guare's vision, the dilemma of all the grotesque characters is the dilemma of all Americans, caught in a culture that "lures people to pursue dazzling dreams frantically." In Guare's new theatrical aesthetic, it is linearity, the ability to break the circle and continue along one's own independent path, that represents new hope and regeneration. (RS)

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ORBITS OF GROTESQUES IN JOHN GUARE'S THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES

In conventional drama, circularity is a positive thing, a return to the beginning, a symbol of the cyclical, generative nature of life. Part of John Guare's intent in his post-Absurdist The House of Blue Leaves is to help establish a new theatrical aesthetic by violating theatrical convention. For Guare, circularity is not a symbol of regeneration but one of stasis. His major characters are all trapped in orbits around an absent or feeble star (an appropriate metaphor because the two people these main characters flutter around are public figures, or "stars"). None of the central characters have the ability to break the circle of their static, empty lives. In Guare's new theatrical aesthetic, it is linearity, the ability to break the circle and continue along one's own independent path, that represents new hope and regeneration.

Guare develops this idea by making all of the characters in the play grotesques, either psychically or physically dysfunctional, unable to manage in much less find contentment with the world they live in. The lone exception is Billy Einhorn, who is literally a "star" because of his profession-successful Hollywood film producer. Metaphorically he is a

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"star" as well, because he is one of the figures the other characters orbit about, hoping to catch a bit of his stellar light, convinced that Billy has the power to change their lives and give them contentment. Significantly, Billy is a relatively minor character, appearing in only the final scene of the second act. The other "star" around which the other characters orbit is the Pope, who never appears at all. The futility of the other characters' lives is emphasized by the way they pin their hopes on rarely present or completely absent forces.

Guare further emphasizes the hollowness of the characters' lives by the significance each places on fame. It is some desire for or problem with the idea of fame that **causes** the grotesque character to be grotesque. Some desire fame, some have the wrong kind of fame, and some have lost fame, but in each case it is fame that is responsible for the dysfunctionality of each character.

The primary fame-seeker and the play's main character is Artie Shaughnessy, a forty-five year old zookeeper who hopes some day to be a songwriter. His first on-stage appearance, the first scene in the play, is at an amateur hour at the appropriately-named El Dorado Bar and Grill. El Dorado is, in Spanish myth, a place that promises great material wealth.

In this opening scene, Artie whines plaintively, "Could you please turn the lights down? A spotlight on me? You promised me a spotlight" (13). This is his entire life seen

in microcosm. He is convinced that he has the talent to be a great singer/songwriter, and that he will ultimately achieve success if he gets the right break. In other words, he feels as if he has been "promised" spotlight, that fame is rightfully his, that he deserves recognition.

He sings songs which are appropriately atrocious, with lines such as "Where is the devil in Evelyn?/What's it doing in Angela's eyes?" (14). Another song in his repertoire that is particularly indicative or his character is entitled "I'm Looking for Something," and contains the following lyrics:

> I'm looking for Something
> I've searched everywhere
> I'm looking for something
> And just when I'm there,
> Whenever I'm near it
> I can see it and hear it
> I'm almost upon it,
> Then it's gone. (14)

Just as those Spanish explorers continued the search for El Dorado, Artie continues his search for fame. He is likely to be as successful in his quest as the Spaniards were in theirs. Yet he is even worse off than the explorers looking for the mythical city of gold, because at least the Spaniards knew what they were looking for. Artie is not so lucky.

Predictably, his audience ignores him, and he leaves, angry because his work does not get the respect he feels it deserves. It never occurs to him that he is simply not good enough to gain the fame he covets, so he lays the blame for his failure

on the audience. This is Artie Shaughnessy's life, looking for something, but not knowing what it is, caught in a holding pattern in life, waiting for someone else to come along and save him.

The two female protagonists are Bananas, Artie's wife, and Bunny, Artie's mistress. Bananas is, as her name suggests, mentally deranged, driven insane by a traumatic experience that made her the butt of jokes on national television. Her speech is considered one of the tour de forces of contemporary American theatre, and I wish I could present it in its entirety; instead I will confine myself to a few relevant excerpts. Three elements are significant to my thesis. Just prior to her mental breakdown, she has gone into Manhattan, is driving through an intersection, and sees four famous people:

> Cardinal Spellman. Jackie Kennedy. Bob Hope. President Johnson. All carrying suitcases. . . ."Get in. I'm a Gypsy. A Gypsy cab. I'll take you where you want to go. Don't you all know each other?. . ." (46)

The last sentence is particularly illustrative of Bananas' naivete and her unrealistic attitude toward the famous. She automatically assumes that because each of the four people is in the public eye, they automatically know each other. By making such an assumption, she places the celebrities into a category together and excludes herself.

Because of their status as celebrities, Bananas knows a great deal about them. She assumes that her interest in them

is reciprocated; she refers to them as "her friends" and is hurt when they run away from her. However, this is not the only trauma she suffers:

> I turn on Johnny Carson to get my mind off and there's Cardinal Spellman and Bob Hope. . .and they tell the story of what happened to them and everybody laughs. Thirty million people watch Johnny Carson and they all laugh. At me. (46)

Not only has Bananas been traumatized by rejection at the hands of people she considers friends, she has undergone the humiliation of being laughed at by an entire nation. The laughter stings all the more because she considers Hope and Spellman to be friends. Yet her desolation is still not complete. The trauma of the event forces her to confront a painful truth, a truth: "I'm nobody. I knew all those people [the celebrities] better than me. . .I know everything about them" (46).

It is this brutal realization of her anonymity and lack of identity which are responsible for her insanity. She has no sense of self, nothing to anchor her. Bananas' desire for recognition by the famous and what they represent are responsible for her grotesquery.

Bunny, Artie's mistress, is particularly pathetic because she defines herself in terms of the man she is with, and she has latched on to Artie because she believes in his dreams of stardom. Her lack of a sense of self worth is illustrated by

her casual attitude toward sex:

> I'll sleep with you anytime you want. Anywhere. In two months I've known you, did I refuse you one? Not once! You want me to climb in the bag with you now? Unzip it--go on--unzip it Give your fingers a smack and I'm flat on my back. (24)

Bunny does not consider herself attractive. However, she feels a compulsive need to hang on to Artie, so she tells Artie she is a fabulous cook but refuses to cook for him until, as she says, "I got that ring right on my cooking finger" (25).

Her mistaking Artie for a genuine talent and her compulsive desire to hang on to him are not the only aspects of her dysfunctional personality; she also cannot hold on to a job. She is always saying things like, "I didn't work in Macy's Music Department for nix" (21), or "I didn't work at ski lodges for nothing" (32), or "I didn't work for Con Edison for nothing" (49). Bunny uses these comments to assert her authority or expertise on various topics, but she unwittingly reveals both her ignorance and undermines her credibility simply by admitting to having held so many different positions.

Bunny is so insecure she is constantly testing Artie, first by making accusations like, "You've been giving me a line--your best friend--big Hollywood big shot--you don't even know him" (37). Later, she forces Artie to call Billy at two o'clock in the morning just to ensure that her lover does in fact know the producer. But once she is convinced that Artie is telling

the truth, she is satisfied--temporarily.

Bunny is in some ways the most marginal of the orbiting grotesques. Not only is she one of the characters who floats around first the Pope and later Billy, she is trapped in a sub-orbit around Artie, seeking a kind of third-hand glory, hoping he will obtain some of the celebrities' glory so she can vicariously get some of her own.

The last of the major orbiting grotesques is Artie's and Bannanas' son, Ronnie, who is a deserter from the Army. Like his mother, he has been warped by an encounter with fame, and who, like the rest of the cast, pins his hopes for recognition on an encounter with the Pope. When Ronnie was twelve years old, movie mogul Billie came to town looking for a young boy to cast as Huckleberry Finn. When Billie came to the Shaughnessy apartment, Ronnie says,

> It suddenly dawned on me. You had to do things to get parts. . .I began . . .[doing] Things I have never done in my life--before or since. I stood on my head and skipped and whirled. . .(52)

Billy's response was, as Ronnie remembers, was to turn to Artie and Bananas and say, "You never told me you had a mentally retarded child" (53). This event was apparently quite traumatic to Ronnie; he considers himself a failure and chooses to recap this event as an explanation as to why her wants to kill the Pope.

It is significant that the cause of Ronny's embarrassment

was his desire for fame--he did his "audition" so that Billy would cast him as Huckleberry Finn. Ronnie is an amalgam of his both his mother and father. Like Bananas, he is permanently scarred by the ridicule of the famous, although Billy's remark was innocent enough. Like his father, Ronnie still wants fame, and is willing to go to desperate lengths to gain it, hoping to gain the public eye by killing the Pope.

In the first act, the orbits of all of the characters center around the Pope, who has flown from Rome to the United States in an attempt to stop the Viet Nam war. His presence has, of course, nothing to do with the plans of any of the other characters, but they nonetheless all hope to get near the Pope so they can change there lives, or alter their orbits.

Bunny's dialogue in the first scene suggests both celestial orbits and the way the other characters literally hope to gain light from the Pope

> You should see the stars!!!. . .I held my autograph book up and let Jupiter shine on it. . .Jupiter and Venus and Mars. They're all out. . .What a welcome for the Pope! (19)

Bunny literally believes that some sort of energy will radiate from the Pope and endow change their lives. Later she tells Artie that she will hold him by the hand and shout, "'Marry us, Pope,' and he'll wave his holy hand and all the emeralds and rubies on his fingers will send Yes beams" (21). When she and Artie leave the apartment to go see the Pope, she tells

Artie, "Your music! You forgot your music! You gotta get it blessed by the Pope!!" (48). Later, we discover that, as the Pope passes by, Artie holds his music up, again as if some sort of beam of light will radiate from his Holiness, imbue Artie's music with "star" quality, and send him on his way to stardom.

Just as Bunny forces Artie to go see the Pope, Artie forces Bananas to try and catch some papal radiance. When he watches the Pope's plane landing on television, Artie makes Bananas kiss the T.V. screen and say, "Make me better God. . .so Artie can go away in peace" (47). Artie hopes that the Pope will not only launch his singing career, but will cure Bananas' mental illness so that Artie can abandon her without feeling guilty. Like the other characters, the orbiting grotesque Artie looks for divine intervention on the part of a stellar character in order to solve all his problems.

Ronnie thinks that assassinating the Pope will make him famous: "I'm going to fool you all. By tonight, I'll be on headlines all over the world. Cover of Time. Life. TV specials" (53). As do all the other orbiting grotesques, Ronnie hopes by latching on to the glory associated with a famous person, he can obtain some of this glory as well.

Most of the main characters' energies in the first act and in, in Ronnie's case, the first half of the second act center around trying to put themselves in the proper orbital positions around the Pope. Bunny has reserved a front row spot along

the route that the Pope will travel on, and she, Artie, and Bananas all go and see the Pope. Ronnie is less successful; he has dressed up as an altar boy so he can sneak his bomb into the Pope's mass at Yankee Stadium, but the plan is foiled by a military policeman who comes to return the A.W.O.L. Ronnie to Fort Dix.

One cannot overlook the metaphorical significance of a Pope who is absent from the center of the orbital system formed by Artie, Bananas, Bunny, and Ronnie. In a secular world, the system cannot be held together by a religious figure, even one as eminent as the Pope. Despite the fact that Artie, Bananas, and Bunny accomplish their goal and actually see the Pope, no mystical light radiates on them and changes their lives. Bananas is still crazy, Artie is still a lousy songwriter, and Bunny is still insecure. Papal radiance cannot change their lives; nothing has changed after their orbit around the Pope.

One also cannot overlook the metaphorical significance of Billy Einhorn's appearance in the second act. Even though God's vicar does not come, Billy does, and Artie, Bananas, and Bunny all switch their orbits from the Pope to Billy, revolving around him and hoping he will make the changes in their lives that the Pope could not. As Gautam Dasgupta puts it, Billy appears "As if in answer to his [Artie's] prayers.

Ironically, Billy works well as a <u>deus ex machina</u>. Where a religious figure was essentially impotent, the figure from

Hollywood is effective. Billy comes into their world and sets things right. As a famous, powerful person, he knows many famous, powerful people. He calls up "General Buckley Revere," (78), a friend of his in the Pentagon and not only gets Ronnie out of the stockade, where he faces desertion charges, but arranges to have him transferred to Rome. Aside from obtaining Ronnie's release and saving him from prison, Billy also saves Ronnie from combat, because everybody in Ronnie's unit is "skedded for Vietnam" (78). Billy also restores Ronnie to his original orbit, because by arranging for the young man's transfer to Rome, Billy has unwittingly enabled Ronnie to be closer to the Pope, the target of his intended assassination.

He also gives Bunny what she wants: an easy lifestyle where she will live among the famous, among the stars, among those who have light. Billy offers to take Bunny away with him, and she readily assents, saying, "The Pope saw my wish today" (83). Apparently, she was less concerned with Artie than with her estimate for his chances of achieving fame. She shifts her orbit from the Artie to Billy.

Billy's action should not be taken as an act of cruelty toward Artie; as a matter of fact, the last thing he says to his childhood friend as he and Bunny leave is, "I just saved your life" (85). He has taken Bunny into his orbit not for his own gratification but so that his two dearest friends, Artie and Bananas, can be restored to their "proper" places.

Billy also tries to discourage Artie from orbital behavior, suggests that he stop looking toward the stars, and tries to assure Artie that his humble life in New York is meaningful. He says,

> Do you know who I make my pictures for? You. . .If I ever thought that you and Bananas weren't here in Sunnyside, seeing my work, loving my work, I could never work again. You're my touch with reality. (84)

Billy has a sense of the way the cosmos should be ordered; he knows where Artie and Bananas belong. Their place is with one another, not in orbit around the Pope or even around himself, but instead in their own place, in their own home, out of a circular orbit that depends on someone else, and hopefully into a linear path that will make them move on in their lives.

Although Billy's character functions effectively as a deus ex machina, Artie is unwilling to take the advice of his God. He is destroyed by the prospect of having to break his orbital behavior, because to do so will mean his admitting to the fact that he will never be a star himself. Left alone with Bananas, he kills her rather than live the humble, linear, meaningful life that Billy has left him to. After he kills Bananas, he begins to sing one of his songs, auditioning for the audience. He has become an orbiting body without something to revolve around, but he continues his circular behavior, hoping for someone to come along, shine their light on him, and turn Artie into a stellar being as well.

In Guare's vision, the dilemma of all of the grotesque characters is the dilemma of all Americans. As S. J. Bernstein suggests, "By teasing use with the fabled union of fame and happiness, our culture lures people to pursue dazzling dreams frantically; the emptiness of the dream and the failure to realize 'success' leave people like Bananas and Artie crushed" (47). Guare emphasizes this by creating a pattern of orbiting grotesques.

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